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SOCIOLOGY AND HOMER.¹

SOME people resent the intrusion of the dismal sciences into fields which they say are too good for materialistic exploitation. This repellent attitude is rather more clearly exhibited by lovers of the oldest Greek and Hebrew literatures than by partisans of more recent productions. The reasons for this are clear enough, upon a little reflection. Both the æsthetic and the religious feelings are here peculiarly vulnerable; and it is a fact that indiscreet, uncandid, or insufficiently instructed investigators have often afforded plenty of justification for a hostility and suspicion which we now deplore.

As far as mere literature and literary feelings are concerned, it appears not unreasonable that Homer might be made a test case. Since Homer stands so high in the estimation of even the fastidious, sociology, by demonstrating some sufficient reason for entering his field, might cause its right to enter other literary inclosures to be admitted, one might say, *a fortiori*. In any case, I think it can be shown, not only that Homer is invaluable to the science of society, but also that this science is able to render Homer, even to his literary sponsors, more real and enjoyable. The latter contention is one which must be demonstrated by actual performance; but the former may be set before sociologists themselves by reasoning along more general lines.

Sociological evidence as to primitive societies is, broadly speaking, either inferential or direct; inferential, when the witnesses are inanimate relics of a past, lost, in this case, to written record and to tradition; direct, when the outlines of the past are preserved by one or both of these agencies. Speaking generally, the latter form of evidence is more satisfactory, and under it Homer would come. Again, this direct evidence is either actual record, or tradition; and Homer would, of course, be ranged under the latter category.

It would be a hard matter to pronounce upon the compara-

¹ See article on "Sociology and Epic" in this JOURNAL for May, 1900.

tive value to the science of society of record and tradition. In general, the best evidence is that which is given most unconsciously; it needs less weighing and correction for bias and error. Records like the Chaldæan contract-tablets need practically no correction; chronicles may need a great deal. Both, even if candid, are marked, to a certain degree, by a narrowness of the range of their interest. The intimate details of daily life are represented but partially, and often fragmentarily and incidentally, in mortgages and bills of sale, and in documents recounting the victories and the magnificence of kings. The former may shed a deal of light upon the industrial organization, property, even marriage systems; the latter upon military affairs, the royal prerogatives, etc. But they do not present a picture of a society as a whole.

Tradition, however, is quite another matter, especially if it is embodied in forms possessing some continuity. It becomes then a sort of ethnography, wherein are illustrated and emphasized these aspects of life in society upon which the interest of mankind has always centered; and in the examination of which human curiosity has, of late years, organized itself in a systematic, scientific form. A body of literature, being usually many-sided by the conditions of its persistence, and by reason of the same necessity full of "local coloring," approaches closer to universality in its evidence as to a society's life than mere record is likely to do, and for this quality a science which aims to study society as a whole can easily afford to sacrifice technically historical information—which runs the risk, besides, in early times, of being trivial and not to the point.

It cannot be denied, of course, that tradition may be very misleading. This is especially the case where there is an absence of the wholesome corrective of context. But, neglecting fragmentary tradition, it is true that in the epic almost everything is pure gold for the sociologist except the main theme—or whatever that part of the production may be called where the author or authors, with an object in view and a point to prove, are led to give a less unconscious and unbiased evidence. But the patriotic, or religious, or dramatic motive, by the very

emphasis of its expression, witnesses to important social facts; and to be effective such motives must have their setting. Fortunately for sociology, it is precisely the setting rather than the "theme" for which it cares. The historian might be vexed because the *Nibelungen-Lied* makes Etzel and Dietrich of Bern contemporaries; but the sociologist is willing even to admit Napoleon I. into mediæval Burgundy, if only that graphic picture of exotic and pagan Christianity may remain undisturbed. In any case, there can be no doubt in the mind of the sociologist as to the great value of the evidence of ancient epics *per se*.

Homer is, then, of great importance as a representative of this class of legendary literature—but what of Homer as Homer? Is there anything in the individual character of the Homeric evidence which renders it superior or inferior, from the sociologist's standpoint, to that afforded by other specimens of the same class of literature?

Academic sociology (or the "science of society," as Professor Sumner has been led to call it, in order to mark a distinction of his science from the medley of slumming, park and sewer improvement, trades-unionism, and what not, that goes by the name of sociology) examines into "the origin and life of human society." It examines the institutions of self-maintenance of a society, those of its self-perpetuation and self-gratification; and also the institutions, customs, etc., which result somewhat more remotely from society's reaction against environment. The ideal evidence at which it aims is, therefore, complete and universal evidence concerning particular societies and their institutions.

Few reports of trained modern observers approach this ideal more closely than does Homer in his entirely unconscious way. We have Arnold's high authority for regarding Homer as "universal," even if we were unable to see it for ourselves. And if we compare these two poems with other analogous productions, it appears to me that the latter, in the matter of breadth of interest, suffer in varying degrees by the comparison. Of the *Kalevala* this is certainly true, and the *Nibelungen-Lied* is unquestionably more provincial and narrow. When one finishes the last

line of that poem, he is left with a confused remembrance of just what the introductory verses promise: wonder-tales of notable heroes; of great bravery; of joys and sorrows; of strong men's conflicts—as the Germans say, the deeds of “Eisenmänner und Riesenweiber.” And if we go back to the Norse sagas which contain the germ of this grandiose poem, the impression is even heightened. There are interesting and invaluable bits of sociologic evidence to be gained; but it would be hard indeed to construct a coherent picture of the society of the time, either from the Norse tales or the later epic. And if this comparison of Homer with analogous literary productions were carried forth, as far as I am competent to judge, I think it could be shown that the picture he gives of Homeric society is far and away ahead of most corresponding representations to be gained from the Russian epic-songs, the Vedic hymns, the *Zend-Avesta*, etc. The Old Testament alone would seem to contest Homer's title for universality, but there are some other reasons why Homer seems, after all, to present the better case.

By a rough sort of quantitative comparison, then, Homer is left among the very best pieces of evidence as to antiquity which the science of society possesses.

The quality of Homer's evidence is likewise very high. The proportion of unconscious setting to conscious argument or theme is extraordinarily large. The latter must be discounted, here as elsewhere, of course; it is valuable less for what it relates than for the indirect light which it throws upon the customs, habits of thought, and national feeling of its time. What was accessory—mere background—to Homer is often of superlative importance to modern science. It is when fancy, with a purpose and a point to make, gets hold of material and serves it up, that scientific suspicion must be ever on guard, striving to detect the untrue and the exaggerated. Racial, caste, and personal bias—disturbing factors to whose presence the mind of the investigator must be super-sensitive—are much more prominent in the theme than in the setting.

Where the authorship of a work is so veiled as is the case in hand, it is out of place to talk of personal bias; yet if it had

been a modern, known to all, who wrote these poems, it would be hard to make out such a bias. Racial contrast certainly appears, but not in any very disconcerting or confusing form.

Caste bias remains; and the forms in which it is wont to vitiate ancient evidence such as that of the epic are, in general, two: the sacerdotal and the military. These are perfectly normal and natural, under primitive and ancient conditions, where the shaman and the chief (in a time of much violence) are the culmination of earthly power. Both are bulwarks in the struggle for existence in this life; and the former even carries over his efficiency into the next. A chronicler of any early period is scarcely likely to be other than a religious or a military chronicler; if he is a shaman or warrior himself, he will, of course, exalt his specialty and profession; if he is neither priest nor king, he must still range himself with one or the other, or with both in one if the political form is theocratic. Under any conditions the representation of the society which he gives is likely to be one-sided, and this is a grievous fault. It limits the field of information—it renders imperative the liberal discounting of what is given. What sociologist would not wish to hear more of the intimate, commonplace life of the mediæval Germans or Franks, or of the Chinese of the time of Confucius? Who would not trade a dozen volumes of accounts of pious monkish exercises for a few pages on the intimate life of the institution in which they were held?

Homer is first of all singularly free from the sacerdotal bias. The study of the poems reveals no specialized priesthood of any importance; the sacerdotal function scarcely existed where men dealt directly with their gods. Nor does the narrative of Homer return with constant and anxious iteration to the demands of a gloomy and exacting cult. Though deeply religious, the people of Homer seem to have had time for something else in life. It is interesting to speculate as to whether the Hebrews would not be found to have enjoyed life more genially and generally than some of their latter-day imitators have fancied, had all their chroniclers been as free of religious bias as he of the *Song of Songs*. It is here, as it seems to me, that Homer surpasses the

Old Testament as a candid sociological record. He is more liberal and cosmopolitan; he does not interpret all life in the light of a single class of ideals—however lofty they may be. There is little “purpose” about Homer. His sacerdotal bias appears vanishingly slight, this being due in large part to the astonishing fact that, as an early chronicler, he seems not to have been affiliated with the priesthood.

There is another blemish, connected more or less with the sacerdotal, of which Homer seems not yet to have been convicted. This might be called the meteorological bias, and has been foisted upon many innocent stories by the dexterous sentimentality of Max Müller and others who seem convinced that the primitive savage, and many of his betters, were interested in the *Morgenroth*, more than in the vicissitudes of the struggle for existence and the competition of life.

Nor is the military bias as provoking in Homer as it is wont to be in early stories. If the fifth and other war-books of the *Iliad* existed alone, there might be some reason for classing Homer with military glorifiers, although even then he would exhibit a liberality of interests sufficient to stagger some of his Norse, Slavic, and other fellow-eulogists. But the fact is that the *Iliad*, taken by itself, is by no means barren of suggestion as to things other than of war; and when to this is added the ethnographical panorama of the *Odyssey*, it is ungrateful to harbor any ill-feeling or impatience for the time spent on military matters.

There is more reason for saying that Homer exhibits an aristocratic bias than for charging him with any other. This is, of course, a sort of military bias and characterizes the attitude of the less powerful in an age of violence. Far less is heard of the common man, in spite of Thersites, Eumæus, and others, than could be wished. Here inferior records at times exhibit an advantage. But popular poems are not composed describing the lowly, until a later age. To get a profitable hearing, in Homer's time, the theme must be lofty, and disassociated with the sordid and commonplace. Here seems to be an occasion for some discounting; if there is any falling short it is here.

And yet, taking the poems in their entirety, it cannot be

denied that one gets a pretty clear view of the society as a whole. The few mentions of the "men of the people" are, with a recounter of such graphic power and discriminating touch, significant beyond their mere allotment of space.

There is still another point of attitude of extreme importance as affecting the character of Homer's evidence. Neither an ancient poet nor a monkish chronicler—nor, indeed, a modern ethnographer—must be allowed to foist upon science conclusions to whose adoption subjective feelings (*e. g.*, of individual or racial superiority) have led. Nor must a civilized, or relatively civilized, authority be permitted, unchallenged, to project his own more developed mentality into the environment of the more primitive society, when he is trying to interpret the latter's life and organization. Neither children's games nor savages' social forms will stand adult or civilized tests of consistency and rationality, though they are perfectly logical when the tortuous course of their development is once apprehended—rendered irregular as it is by the introduction of factors, real or imaginary, with which the more developed intelligence no longer reckons. To correctly reflect another society's life, one must make it, at least temporarily, his own. But suppose this life *is* his own; how much greater will then be his understanding and sympathy—and how much more correct his representation! This advantage is, of course, not peculiar to Homer among national chroniclers.

The Homeric records, then, are scientifically more than satisfactory as they stand. Few are incompetent to speak of the authenticity of this their present form, but one is inclined to believe, first, that legends, traditions, etc., held in the esteem by later generations in which Homer was held, are not apt to be fundamentally altered even over long periods of time. There is some comparative evidence to support this belief. That the poems had not been materially modified coincidentally with material changes in the temper of the succeeding generations is indicated by the attitude of the philosophic age, "when the Greeks were beginning to notice with perplexity and pain that the Homeric poems, become to them a sacred book, agreed but ill with their own experience of life."¹ We of the present day have

¹ TYLOR, *Anthropology*, p. 379.

living witness before us of the persistence of legend, for ages unmodifiable in the face of fact, science, and changing standards; perhaps Homer was not to the Greek what the Old Testament was to our fathers, but the difference is one of degree merely.

Again, it appears that changes of relatively small magnitude would not have altered the scientific value of Homer materially. From the sociological standpoint, where culture-epochs are regarded rather than years and decades, there appear to be no divergences between the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, or between parts of either poem sufficient to mar in its essentials the consistent type of civilization exhibited. From the standpoint of this science, everything points to the coherence and oneness of Homer. For these reasons the social scientist who delves in the records of civilization may pass over with little danger the highly technical and apparently quite unsettled discussion of text-chronology. This is a great economy of effort. It is not clear why the same attitude might not be adopted in the case of the *Nibelungen-Lied*, in spite of the labors of Lachmann and others expended upon it. Presumably, it would be impossible with the Old Testament, and for this reason, again, that congeries of documents is less available for scientific purposes than is the unified and consistent Homer.

It may seem at first sight a trivial matter upon which to base scientific preference, but it is none the less true that Homer's manner and simple straightforwardness, together with the beauty of his work, instinctively prejudice one in his favor. Candor speaks for itself; and while general attractiveness may not be an ideal quality in scientific material, it is a very practical one. Would that all ethnographers, particularly the Germans, were able to render their accounts as attractive as do Homer and Herodotus! Homer's work is certainly in incomparably better taste, as judged by present-day criteria, than is that of most of his fellows in the epic art.

There is, finally, one circumstance which lends to Homer a sort of distinctive racial importance far and away ahead of that of any of the other chronicles of antiquity, except perhaps the

Old Testament. It is of overwhelming interest to the science of society to know the past of the particular race to which Homer's productions belong. In spite of archæological progress, the lacuna which, as we have seen, Homer fills so adequately, is one whose existence would be a great scientific calamity. Here Homer narrows the boundaries of our ignorance to no slight degree, and so notably aids science toward the formation of some generalizations as to the origin and life of human society.

From the foregoing it would appear that the gain from the sociological study of Homer lies all on one side. This is far from true. To take only the most general consideration: the great service to Homeric study of the science of society lies in the application of the comparative method to what has hitherto been regarded as quite apart and *sui generis*. Homeric society and Homer himself are thereby rescued from an unnatural and untenable position of exceptionality into which some enthusiastic and uncandid writers, notably Gladstone, have tried to force them, and are thrown into line with the general course of human evolution. This is a gain to humanity's organized knowledge of itself, and it cannot be a loss to these venerable and noble productions themselves; nor to others which have been placed, unhappily, in a similarly false position.

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